Russia loses ally in Venezuela, but hopes to gain from Trump's 'Wild West' realpolitik

MOSCOW: Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro's capture by the United States has deprived Vladimir Putin of an ally and could increase US "oil clout", but Moscow is eying potential gains from President Donald Trump's division of the world into spheres of influence.

Special Forces seized Maduro only eight months after the Russian president agreed a strategic partnership with his "dear friend", and Trump said the US was taking temporary control of Venezuela, which has the world's biggest oil reserves.

Some Russian nationalists have criticised the loss of an ally and contrasted the swift US operation with Russia's failure to take control of Ukraine in almost four years of war.

But on another level, what Russia casts as Trump's "piracy" and "regime change" in the United States' "backyard" is more tolerable for Moscow, especially if Washington becomes bogged down in Venezuela.

"Russia has lost an ally in Latin America," said a senior Russian source, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the situation.

"But if this is an example of Trump's Monroe Doctrine in action, as it seems to be, then Russia also has its own sphere of influence." The source was referring to the Trump administration's desire to reassert US dominance in the Western Hemisphere and revive the 19th-century Monroe Doctrine, which declared the area to be Washington's zone of influence.

A second Russian source said Moscow saw the US operation as a clear attempt to gain control of Venezuela's oil wealth and observed that most Western powers had not openly criticised it.

Trump's Wild West

Putin has been trying to stake out a Russian sphere of influence in former Soviet republics in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Ukraine in a push opposed by Washington since the Cold War ended.

Putin has not commented publicly on the US operation in Venezuela, although Russia's foreign ministry has urged Trump to release Maduro and called for dialogue. The ministry previously cast Trump's actions as modern-day piracy in the Caribbean.

Russian state media have depicted the operation as a U.S. "kidnapping", reported remarks by Trump on the US having "sick" neighbours, and referred to the U.S. capture of military leader Manuel Noriega in Panama on January 3, 1990.

"That Trump just 'stole' the president of another country shows that there is basically no international law — there is only the law of force — but Russia has known that for a long time," Sergei Markov, a former Kremlin adviser, said.

He said the modern-day Monroe Doctrine — which Trump suggested could be updated as the "Donroe Doctrine" — could be interpreted in different ways.

"Is the United States really ready to recognise Russia's dominance over the former Soviet Union, or is it simply that the United States is so strong that it will not tolerate any great powers even close to it?"

Alexei Pushkov, who chairs the commission on information policy in Russia's Federation Council, or senate, saw the US operation in Venezuela as a direct implementation of the US National Security Strategy, depicting it as an attempt to revive US supremacy and gain sway over more oil reserves.

But he said it risked a return to "the wild imperialism of the 19th century and, in fact, reviving the concept of the Wild West — the Wild West in the sense that the United States has regained the right to do what they want in the Western Hemisphere."

"Will the triumph turn into a disaster?" he asked.

Russian nationalists compare

For Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, having a US president focused on — and potentially bogged down in — the Western Hemisphere would appear to be more than acceptable, given Russia's focus on Ukraine and China's on Taiwan.

But some Russian nationalists have criticised the loss of an ally so soon after Bashar al-Assad's fall in Syria, and compared the speed of the US operation with the much slower pace of Russia's advances in Ukraine.

Russia's largest oil producer, Rosneft, terminated operations in Venezuela in 2020 and sold its assets related to operations there to a company owned by Russia's government.

Jailed Russian nationalist Igor Girkin said the US had shown in Venezuela how a great power should act when facing a potential threat and cast the US operation as part of an attempt to cut oil flows to China.

"We've had another blow to our image — another country that counted on Russia's help did not get it," Girkin said.

"Having got bogged down up to our ears in the bloody swamp of Ukraine, we are practically incapable of anything else, especially since we cannot help Venezuela in another hemisphere that is right next door to the United States."—Reuters

FRENCH President Emmanuel Macron and his wife Brigitte Macron at the Elysee Palace. —Reuters/File

10 convicted over cyber harassment of Brigitte Macron

PARIS: A Paris court on Monday sentenced 10 people accused of cyber-bullying President Emmanuel Macron's wife Brigitte by spreading false information about her gender and insinuations related to the age difference between France's first couple.

The relationship between Emmanuel Macron, 48, and Brigitte, 72, who met while she was a drama teacher at his school, has been the subject of intense interest since he became president in 2017.

Eight defendants were handed suspended sentences of four to eight months in prison while a ninth man was sentenced to six months in prison over his absence from the hearing.

Presiding judge Thierry Donard described the claims of the French first lady's "alleged paedophilia" as "malicious, degrading and insulting", saying the defendants had received sentences for "intentionally harming the complainant". They and a tenth person were ordered to follow a course against hate speech online, to be paid at their own expense. Three individuals considered to be the key instigators online also had their social media accounts suspended for six months.

"The most important things are the prevention courses and the suspension of some of the accounts" of the perpetrators, said Jean Ennochi, Brigitte Macron's lawyer, after the verdict was handed down. Brigitte Macron herself did not appear at the trial hearings in October but told investigators after filing her complaint that the claim she is a transgender woman has "strongly affected" her and her loved ones.

In recent years, scrutiny of the couple's relationship has extended to the widespread publication of false information that they have resolved not to ignore and instead combat in court.—AFP

Palestinian embassy inaugurated in London

LONDON: The embassy of Palestine was officially inaugurated in London in a short ceremony on Monday, hailed by its ambassador as a "profound milestone" in British-Palestinian relations.

"We gather today to mark a historic moment — the inauguration of the embassy of the State of Palestine to the United Kingdom, with full diplomatic status and privileges," said Ambassador Husam Zomlot in a speech outside what was previously known as the Palestinian Mission to the UK in west London.

The official upgrading of the mission to embassy status came after the UK announced it would recognise the State of Palestine in September 2025, along with several other countries, including Australia and Canada, at a time of major international concern about the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

Sporting a traditional black and white keffiyeh scarf, Zomlot told the ceremony this is "not merely a change of name", but a "change of direction" towards Palestinian statehood.

"What a way to begin a new year together, marking a profound milestone in the British-Palestinian relations, and in the Palestinian people's long journey to freedom and self-determination," Zomlot said, before unveiling the embassy's new plaque.

"This is a day of hope, a day of steadfastness, and a day that reminds the world that peace is not only possible, but it is inevitable... when rooted in justice, dignity, equality, and mutual recognition." The UK's foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a query on whether the UK planned to follow suit by opening a British embassy in the Palestinian territories.

Speaking just after Zomlot at a lectern flanked by Palestinian and British national flags, UK diplomatic representative Alistair Harrison said the occasion represented a "moment of hope". "This is the beginning of a step change in our bilateral relationship," he said.

"I wish you, ambassador, and your team, a very happy stay in what is now your embassy, and congratulations." A fragile ceasefire has been in place since October in Gaza, following a devastating conflict by Israel in response to Hamas's unprecedented October 7, 2023, raid on Israel.—AFP

Pentagon censures senator over 'seditious' video

WASHINGTON: The Pentagon has issued a letter of censure to Democratic Senator Mark Kelly and may reduce his military rank in retirement over a video urging US personnel to refuse illegal orders, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said on Monday.

"Kelly — and five other members of Congress — released a reckless and seditious video that was clearly intended to undermine good order and military discipline," Hegseth said in a post on X. In response to the November video and other statements, the Pentagon opened proceedings that could see Kelly's retired rank reduced, said Hegseth, who has also "issued a formal Letter of Censure, which outlines the totality of Captain (for now) Kelly's reckless misconduct."

The senator from Arizona hit back, saying on X that Hegseth "wants to send the message to every single retired service member that if they say something he or Donald Trump doesn't like, they will come after them the same way. It's outrageous and it is wrong."—AFP

PERSONNEL of emergency services arrive at the scene following an Israeli air strike on the village of Kfar Hatta, in southern Lebanon.—AFP

Israel strikes Lebanon after evacuation warnings

BEIRUT: The Israeli military launched strikes on southern and eastern Lebanon on Monday, Lebanese state media reported, after warning it would hit what it called Hezbollah and Hamas targets in four villages.

It was the first such warning issued by the Israeli military this year, as Israel continues to strike targets in Lebanon despite a ceasefire with Hezbollah.

A photographer in Kfar Hatta, one of the targeted villages in south Lebanon, saw dozens of families flee the village after the warning was issued, amid drone activity in the area, adding that ambulances and fire trucks were on standby.

The Israeli military said in a statement that it "began striking Hezbollah and Hamas terror targets in Lebanon".

Lebanon's state-run *National News Agency* (*NNA*) reported strikes on the four villages.

In two separate posts on X, the military's Arabic-language spokesman, Colonel Avichay Adraee, said the villages were Kfar Hatta and Annan in south Lebanon, and Al-Manara and Ain al-Tineh in eastern Lebanon.

Adraee said the military would hit Hezbollah sites in Kfar Hatta and Ain al-Tinah, and Hamas sites in Annan and Al-Manara.

The *NNA* said the home targeted in Al-Manara belonged to Sharhabil Sayed, a Hamas leader in Lebanon who was killed by Israel in 2024.

Repeated attacks

Despite a year-old ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, Israel carries out regular strikes on Lebanon, usually saying it is bombing Hezbollah sites and operatives, and occasionally Hamas targets.

Two people were killed in an Israeli strike that targeted a vehicle on Sunday, around 10 kilometres (six miles) from the border, the Lebanese health ministry said.

In November, an Israeli strike on south Lebanon's Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp killed 13 people.

Israel said it targeted a Hamas compound, with the group rejecting the claim.

It has also hit Hamas's ally in Lebanon, Islamist group Jamaa Islamiya, which claimed responsibility for multiple attacks against Israel before the ceasefire.

Under heavy US pressure and fears of expanded Israeli strikes, Beirut has committed to disarming Hezbollah, which was badly weakened after more than a year of hostilities with Israel, including two months of open war that ended with the November 2024 ceasefire.

Lebanon's army was expected to complete the disarmament south of the Litani River — about 30 kilometres from the border with Israel — by the end of 2025, before tackling the rest of the country.

All four of Monday's targeted villages are located north of the river.

Israel's Foreign Minister Gideon Saar on Sunday called the disarmament efforts far from sufficient.

Lebanon's cabinet is to meet on Thursday to discuss the army's progress, while the ceasefire monitoring committee — comprising Lebanon, Israel, the United States, France, and UN peacekeepers — is also set to meet this week.

At least 350 people have been killed by Israeli fire in Lebanon since the ceasefire, according to a tally of Lebanese health ministry reports.—AFP

At UNSC, Pakistan

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crises, instability in the region "does not augur well for regional and international peace and security".

He reminded council members that the UN Charter bound states to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, and to uphold sovereign equality, non-interference in internal affairs and the peaceful settlement of disputes.

Ambassador Jadoon said unilateral military action contravened these "sacrosanct principles" as well as the doctrine of sovereign immunity, warning that such actions set dangerous precedents and risked eroding the foundations of the global legal framework.

He cautioned that such actions also fuelled instability which, "as history has shown time and again, can lead to unpredictable and uncontrollable outcomes for years to come".

Calling for de-escalation, the Pakistani envoy said that at this critical juncture, "the path forward must be one of dialogue and diplomacy", stressing that durable solutions to political differences could only be achieved through peaceful means and with full respect for the will of the Venezuelan people, free from external interference.

He expressed hope that Latin America and the Caribbean, recognised as a "Zone of Peace", would remain free from conflict and confrontation and continue moving towards enhanced regional cooperation and improved prosperity.

Ambassador Jadoon noted that the offices of the UN secretary general remained available for this purpose.

UN chief voices concern

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres also raised concerns on Monday over a possible intensification of instability in Venezuela following the capture of President Nicolas Maduro by US forces.

The 15-member Security Council met at UN headquarters in New York just hours before Nicolas Maduro was due to appear in a Manhattan federal court on drug charges, including narco-terrorism conspiracy.

"I am deeply concerned about the possible intensification of instability in the country, the potential impact on the region, and the precedent it may set for how relations between and among states are conducted," Mr Guterres said in a statement delivered to the council by UN political affairs chief Rosemary DiCarlo.

He also expressed concern that the US operation to capture Nicolas Maduro in Caracas on Saturday did not respect the rules of international law.

US defends action

As UN officials and several diplomats criticised Washington's intervention, US Ambassador Michael G. Waltz defended the action before the Security Council as a justified "surgical law enforcement operation".

"If this body confers legitimacy on an illegitimate narco-terrorist with the same treatment under the Charter as a democratically elected head of state, what kind of organisation is this?" Mr Waltz asked.

'Deeply shocked'

China's representative said his country was "deeply shocked by, and strongly condemns" what he termed the United States' "unilateral, illegal and bullying acts" against Venezuela.

He accused Washington of trampling on the Venezuela's sovereignty and placing military action above diplomacy.

Russian Ambassador Vassily A. Nebenzia also condemned the United States for what he called armed aggression in violation of international law, urging Washington to immediately release the "legitimately elected president" and his spouse. Calling on council members to abandon double standards, Mr Nebenzia warned against justifying "such an egregious act of aggression" out of fear of what he termed the "American global gendarme".

He further accused the United States of seeking control over Venezuela's natural resources, saying its actions were generating "fresh momentum for neocolonialism and imperialism".

Maduro in court as Washington calls the shots

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Tren de Aragua gang.

He has long denied the allegations, saying they were a mask for imperialist designs on Venezuela's rich oil reserves.

Meanwhile in Caracas, after first denouncing Maduro's capture as a colonial oil-grab and "kidnapping", Venezuela's acting president, Delcy Rodriguez, softened her stance, saying it was a priority to have respectful relations with Washington.

After being formally sworn in on Monday as the country's interim president by her brother Jorge — the head of the national assembly legislature — she struck a softer note.

"We invite the US government to work together on an agenda of cooperation," Rodriguez said. "President Donald Trump, our peoples and our region deserve peace and dialogue, not war."

Venezuela's parliament also forcibly denounced the capture of its leftist leader, while vowing support for his stand-in.

Trump has threatened another strike if Venezuela does not cooperate with opening its oil industry and stopping drugs. Trump also threatened Colombia and Mexico on Sunday, and said Cuba's communist government "looks like it's ready to fall".

Just how the US would work with a post-Maduro government, full of sworn ideological enemies, is unclear. Trump appears to have sidelined for now the Venezuelan opposition, where many anti-Maduro activists had assumed this would be their moment.

The US position leaves the Venezuelan opposition, which the Trump administration says was robbed of victory by Maduro, out in the cold.

Lat-Am reactions

Latin American leaders responded sharply to Trump's jibes.

Speaking to reporters on Air Force One on Sunday Trump made similar threats of military action against Colombia, saying the South American country is "very sick too" and "run by a sick man who likes making cocaine and selling it to the United States."

"He has cocaine mills and cocaine factories and is not going to be doing it very long," Trump alleged.

Colombia's President Gustavo Petro rejected the threats, saying: "That's not how you threaten a Latin American president who emerged from the armed struggle and then from the people of Colombia's fight for Peace."

Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum said on Monday that the Americas 'do not belong' to any power after Trump invoked the Monroe Doctrine, asserting US "dominance" of the hemisphere.

"The Monroe Doctrine is a big deal, but we've superseded it by a lot, by a real lot. They now call it the Donroe document," Trump told a news conference, slapping his name on the policy principle.

Sheinbaum hit back Monday, saying: "The Americas do not belong to any doctrine or any power. The American continent belongs to the peoples of each of the countries that comprise it."

International warnings

China, Russia and Iran, which have longstanding ties with Maduro's government, were quick to condemn the operation. Some US allies, including the EU, expressed alarm.

China called for Maduro to be "immediately released" in a condemnation of the US operation, which its foreign ministry said was a "clear violation of international law." Iran said on Monday that its relations with close ally Venezuela remained unchanged and called for Maduro's release.

Similarly, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told President Trump that Venezuela must not collapse into chaos.

"Any attack on the sovereignty of the people and any violation of international law will generate serious complications within the international order," Erdogan said he told Trump over the phone.

Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron on Monday said he "neither supported nor approved" the US military operation to grab Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro.

On Monday, government spokeswoman Maud Bregeon reported Macron as telling cabinet ministers: "We defend international law and the freedom of peoples. The method employed is neither supported nor approved." She said Macron added that, for Venezuela, "if there is to be a transition, then the 2024 winner must obviously play a central role in it".

UK premier Kier Starmer said on Monday it was up to the United States to justify its actions in Venezuela after capturing Maduro, describing the situation as "not straightforward".

"What we need in Venezuela is a peaceful transition to democracy. That was our position before this weekend, it remains our position," Starmer told reporters.—Agencies